Senior Action in a Gay Environment

sage

TRANSFORMING the Face of Aging

sage
Senior Action in a Gay Environment
305 Seventh Avenue, 16th Floor
New York, NY 10001
212.741.2247
Fax: 212.366.1947
www.sageusa.org

Dear Friends:

Today, our vibrant and vital community of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) seniors is truly transforming the face of aging. This is happening both:

- In the LGBT community of all ages – where ideas that devalue old age are being challenged with greater energy than ever before,

- And in the mainstream senior community – where a recognition of the rights of LGBT seniors is forcing healthy changes in institutions that serve seniors.

These transformations echo throughout all of SAGE's work: our national advocacy, our community building, our clinical and social programs and our sensitivity training within the institutions seniors depend upon.

While LGBT seniors continue to be drastically underserved by society's institutions, they have nonetheless demonstrated a remarkable resiliency. Today, hundreds of volunteers and thousands of members are active participants in SAGE, inventing and redefining ways to best provide for all of us in our old age.

In the long run, this work will not just benefit the LGBT community, but have positive implications for how all of society can best cope with the growing aging crisis. This is because LGBT seniors today resemble future generations of seniors (gay or straight) in that they are much less likely to be able to access traditional family support – support that is the underpinning of current aging policy and care structures.

Increasingly, the burgeoning senior population will have to become more dependent on the kind of community-building that is central to SAGE's work—connecting people who are not traditional "family" in meaningful structures of community and support.

LGBT people stand poised once again at a watershed moment – just as we were at the beginning of the AIDS crisis – to provide leadership on one of the most important challenges of our time.

Because SAGE is a member-driven organization, many of our programs had their genesis in the idea of a SAGE member. Many came from individuals who have thoughtfully examined their own relationship to the aging process and shared their ideas for our benefit.

In the pages that follow are a series of profiles of individuals and groups who reflect many facets of SAGE's work. I hope that you'll be inspired, as I am, by their stories and join SAGE today in working for a better aging future for us all.

Sincerely,

Terry

Terry Kaelber
Executive Director

SAGE'S VISION
for the Future

In a Better Aging Future...

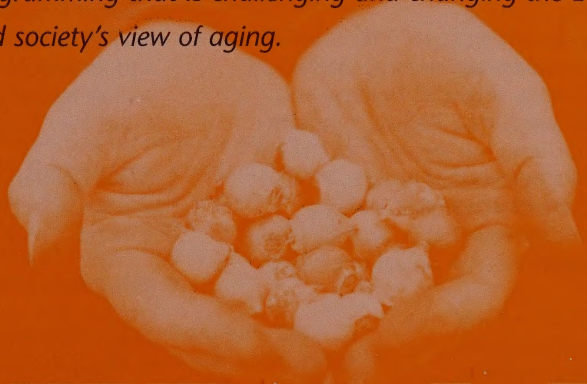
- The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (**LGBT**) communities and all of society will embrace and celebrate aging, and see old age as a phase of life of equal value to all others.

- All of society will also possess a full understanding of the problems facing seniors and the special concerns of those that are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

- The heart and soul of every social service agency — particularly those that serve the **LGBT** community — will be concerned about access to quality services and inclusion of our seniors.

- All **LGBT** seniors, regardless of their abilities or physical limitations will:
    - experience inclusion in our culture,
    - have a feeling of safety,
    - be a full part of the LGBT community, and
    - be comfortable in their sexuality.

SAGE is pioneering these changes through its social service, community organizing, advocacy and empowerment work, and provides model programming that is challenging and changing the LGBT community's and society's view of aging.



TRANSFORMING
the Face of Aging

SAGE, or Senior Action in a Gay Environment, was founded in 1977 and is the nation's oldest and largest social service and advocacy organization dedicated to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) seniors. SAGE offers social services, programs and community-building to LGBT seniors in and around New York City and provides education and advocacy on LGBT aging issues nationwide.

SOCIAL SERVICES

Crisis Intervention and Ongoing Assistance: professional social workers advocate for individual seniors in areas such as medical and legal services, home care, housing and help obtaining government and other benefits.

- **Counseling:** individual, homebound, family and group counseling on such issues as bereavement, coming out later in life, retirement, long-term illnesses, caregiver's and teleconferencing support, HIV/AIDS, etc.
- **Group Activities:** over 100 activities a month address our cultural, intellectual, legal, health, financial, political and spiritual concerns. Regular programming includes our informal afternoon "drop-in," discussion groups, a Legal Clinic, socials, brunches, dances, discount theater tickets, and walks and day trips to nearby points of interest.

- **Volunteers serve here.**

PROGRAMS

- **Friendly Visitors for the Homebound:** volunteer assistance and companionship—as well as our professional in-home care management, counseling and group teleconferencing—for the temporarily or permanently homebound.
- **Lend-a-Hand:** volunteers provide ad-hoc assistance for seniors-in-need by running errands or accompanying them to appointments and SAGE events.

SAGE Positive: a national model for caring for older people living with HIV/AIDS. Offers social service support and individual and group counseling, as well as education for the public about those over fifty with HIV/AIDS.

Older Lesbian Project: support, advocacy and social activities especially for older lesbians.

- **Pen Pals:** a volunteer-driven service to combat the isolation of LGBT seniors around the world by connecting, via correspondence, those who have similar interests.

TRANSFORMING the Face of Aging

COMMUNITY BUILDING

- **SAGE Neighbors:** opportunities to socialize and access a network of peer support at the neighborhood level.
- **Harlem and The Bronx Initiative:** outreach to identify the needs and concerns of LGBT seniors living in these communities and develop new programming that addresses them.
- **Rainbow Aging Awareness Project (RAAP):** a coalition of senior groups in New York City to increase knowledge and awareness of LGBT seniors within the mainstream and LGBT communities.

EDUCATION

- **National Conference on Aging in the LGBT Community:** a unique biennial gathering to advance understanding of LGBT aging issues among researchers, service providers and activists from around the world.
- **Trainings for Care Professionals:** presentations to increase sensitivity at conferences, senior centers, hospitals, nursing homes and other venues about LGBT aging issues.
- **Publications/Films:** the SAGE newsletter, our Housing Study, teaching aids and information about other resources on LGBT aging.

  SAGENet: technical and other support to initiate and sustain grassroots SAGE-affiliated organizations serving LGBT seniors across the U. S. and Canada.

ADVOCACY

- **Task Forces and Advocacy Groups:** member-driven groups such as the Ageism Task Force, the Women's Task Force, the Anti-Discrimination Task Force, the Heritage Committee and Old Queers Acting Up that organize and advocate for policies and practices addressing the needs of our community.
- **National LGBT Senior Needs Assessment/Advocacy:** research to assess the needs of LGBT seniors and advocate for new national strategies.

  SAGE Safe Havens: development and dissemination nationally of a facility-wide training curriculum for nursing homes willing to invest the time and resources to become welcoming and supportive of our community.

Loretta Cadogan: Community Support and Spirituality Transform a Time of Crisis

SAGE Social and Group Services include:

- Crisis Intervention and Ongoing Assistance
- Counseling
- Group Activities
- Friendly Visitors for the Homebound
- Lend-a-Hand
- SAGE Positive
- Older Lesbian Project
- Pen Pals

In 2001, Loretta Cadogan, now 65, was diagnosed with cancer and underwent an operation on her throat. As a result of ongoing treatments, she was forced to stop working and driving, and now has difficulty speaking.

Referred to SAGE by a friend, Loretta began working with a SAGE social worker who provided assistance and helped reverse the isolation she felt. "During my recovery, not being able to talk, I became somewhat withdrawn," she says. "But SAGE staff and a volunteer would call me and come and visit."

After a recovery period, she began getting out more. "SAGE encouraged me to come out and be part of the community. They even sent me a volunteer to escort me."

Loretta appreciated the personal, sensitive attention she received from SAGE. Of other, larger agencies, she says, "I have been through it all—the tension and the stress." Before she got involved in SAGE, she wondered, "Where is the respect for you as a senior? Where is the compassion if you are gay, a senior and handicapped?

Thank God for SAGE and their genuine compassion.

We gay seniors desperately need that."

She now encourages others, regardless of their health status, to avail themselves of the community SAGE offers. "As we age as gay seniors, it is so encouraging to know that we have a gay community organization to get involved in. We gay seniors are now able to socialize and enjoy ourselves in a gay environment."

Loretta's life has changed a lot in recent years, yet she says, "If I run into any problems, I can not only call my immediate family, but I know I can also call SAGE." Though she lives with greater physical limitations, she speaks of being sustained by a deepening spirituality. "Getting closer to God has brought great satisfaction into my life. As I recover from my operation, I was surprised that my feelings, which I thought would be anger and depression, turned out to be endurance and faith."

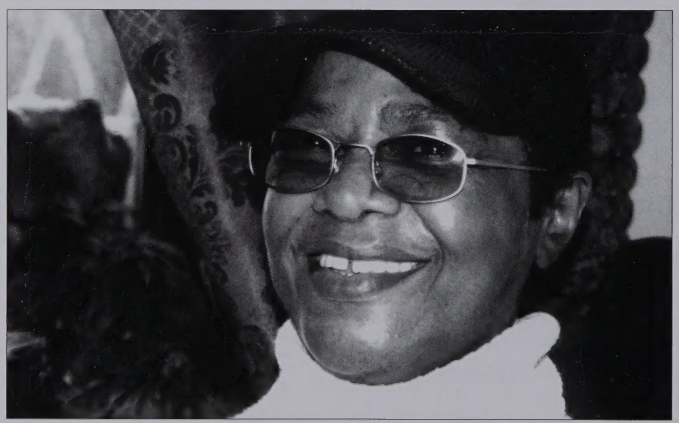


Photo by John Menzer

SAGE 75+ Group

SAGE's 75+ Group for LGBT Seniors is facilitated by Staff Gerontologist "Emeritus" Mary Jeanne Sanford. The group meets weekly to discuss issues of concern, exchange information and offer each other support.

Photo by Richard Rinaldi

Volunteer Hosts: Working Together to Offer Seniors a Safe Place to Gather

"It's like throwing a party everyday," proclaims Al, one of SAGE's irrepressible Drop-in Hosts. He is one of nearly a dozen dedicated volunteers who make one of SAGE's largest and most popular social offerings run like a charm.

SAGE's Drop-in offers LGBT seniors the opportunity every weekday afternoon to stop by and socialize, have a cup of coffee and a sweet, play cards or scrabble, pick up some free theater tickets or just share a good laugh.

These volunteers rotate the role of the host at a successful party, invisibly greasing the wheels of sociability, greeting new people, and being attuned and attending to anyone who's having difficulty. They provide a welcoming environment as well as refreshments on an incredible budget—$12 a day for seasonally appropriate drinks and snacks for up to 100 people!

They also offer seniors an accessible "point-of-entry" to the vast array of programs and services available through SAGE and provide newcomers with materials and information about membership in an informal setting. In this way, seniors who may simply be looking for a sense of community can learn about how they can pursue other interests at SAGE, and how to access SAGE's affirming social services, if the need arises.

By all accounts, they love their work—they have over **forty years** of collective experience at these gatherings. Over the years, these volunteers have come to form a team. They fill in for one another in a pinch, ensuring that the Drop-in is predominantly run with volunteer time and energy.

Why should you visit SAGE's Drop-in? One Host said it best: Even if you don't consider yourself old now, you'll be a better LGBT senior when the time comes if you rehearse!

Support Teams: Inventing New Forms of Community to Fight Isolation

SAGE Community Building Programs include:

- SAGE Neighbors
- Harlem and The Bronx Initiative
- Rainbow Aging Awareness Project (RAAP)

"Neighbors taking care of each other," is how one person who heard about the Support Team for the Upper West Side/SAGE Neighbors described it. It sounds simple – yet by developing this model of "neighbors helping neighbors,"

SAGE's Support Team is at the vanguard of creating new ways of strengthening our community.

Consisting of a half-dozen of the most active members of the SAGE Neighbors program, the Support Team is organized around a basic concept. That is, most people are happy to help others when they are able, but would also need assistance as well on occasion. Like many seniors, SAGE members sometimes need accompaniment to a doctor's appointment, SAGE gatherings and outings, or respite from caring for a sick partner.

Traditionally, seniors turn to biological family for this help. But as one Team member stated: "LGBT seniors in New York City are a community largely made up of people from other parts of the country." As a result, even if supportive, family members often live elsewhere, presenting a barrier to receiving this help.

The Support Team's challenge is to respond to requests for assistance for Upper West Side SAGE members who need neighborly help.

But a senior's role can oscillate between being the provider to being the recipient of assistance. This is evident in the Support Team, whose members face serious health challenges themselves and who thus provide support to each other as well as to Upper West Side SAGE members at large.

At one recent meeting, Team members discussed the range of barriers that prevent many from reaching out for assistance. Some people only feel comfortable getting help from someone they know; while others prefer receiving assistance from a SAGE volunteer, but not someone they see socially. Understanding and being responsive to these feelings is one key to creating an effective system of support.

By providing the structure of monthly meetings and offering SAGE Neighbors ways to make connections to people who live within their zip code, SAGE is nurturing the awareness of one another that is crucial to overcoming the isolation that so many seniors suffer. Support Team members credit these occasions with satisfying a need for emotional support they had sometimes not even been conscious of.

The **SAGE Neighbors** Support Team is an innovative program that is **redefining the way seniors give and receive support while also reducing the isolation that imperils our ability to age well.** Through their commitment to this program, Support Team members are helping create a new kind of community for seniors.

Ira Jeffries: Designing Social and Cultural Programs To Bring Us Together

The SAGE Neighbors model to strengthen neighborhood communities begins by convening LGBT seniors in a given area. SAGE member and accomplished playwright Ira Jeffries is helping SAGE do just this in Harlem.

Now aged 70, Ira has been attending SAGE activities downtown for over 10 years and says that those activities "will always be a part of lesbian life." But she also sometimes craves a community closer to home. "Sometimes I just don't feel like traveling," she says.

Identifying partners like Ira is the first step in establishing this SAGE program within a neighborhood. By bringing together individuals willing to share their talents, SAGE can help unleash nascent forms of community and defeat the increasing challenges of isolation many face with age.

Ira invited a group of neighborhood friends to her home and helped establish this core group to design events to attract other local seniors. Ira explains that these initial get-togethers are intended to "find out what people's skills are and what they are most interested in, such as safety, physical activity, healthcare and sexuality." Therefore,

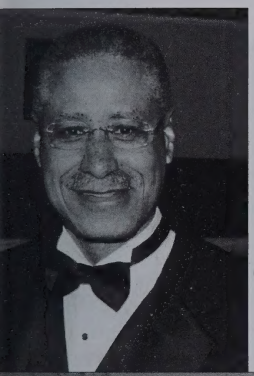
the SAGE Neighbors program emerges organically in each neighborhood, rather than having a static model imposed upon it.

The social and educational events that result—with some highlighting Harlem's proud LGBT ancestry and rich cultural history—draw seniors together, creating the critical mass of people necessary for a new sense of community to take root. Ira says she knows the community is there, but she hasn't known "where and how to find them." To assist in this community building, SAGE provides organizational staff support, arranges for space and provides funds.

Establishing a stronger sense of an LGBT senior community in Harlem also serves a larger purpose. Ira hopes that the connections that form will let people know that "we are willing to help them out in a crisis." A strong local community is the necessary fertile ground for the emergence of new strategies to bring expanded LGBT senior services to chronically underserved communities.

John Hunter: New Visions of Aging Shape an Agenda for Change

John Hunter is the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Cleveland State University. He traveled to New York to participate in the first day-long SAGE membership meeting, convened to share and build on the exciting and varied work SAGE members are engaged in to strengthen our community and fight ageism and homophobia.



John agreed that we all inherit our attitudes about aging in part from our families. "My family had very positive sentiments towards aging and older people," he said. "Elders were revered and were at the center of the family and community." But in the larger society and the LGBT community, John's impressions are quite different. "Within our culture, there is a fear of aging and of old people. We live in a culture that exalts youth, with youth defining the cultural models."

Photo by Thomas McGeehan

How can we change this? John felt he glimpsed the promise of our community at this meeting. "I was astonished by the vitality of the group, the sheer variety of individuals, their sexiness and intellect, and the articulate and positive way they expressed their needs and desires—people in their 60s, 70s and 80s concerned with such basic needs as companionship, love and affection, sexual fulfillment and engagement with the world."

John left the meeting committed to the idea that **"older LGBT people must act on our own behalf. Through organizations like SAGE, we need to take charge of our lives and culture.** We need not be dependent upon youth culture for our cues. Sexy, vibrant, interesting and engaged older LGBTs will attract others."

Through community, John hopes that we can redefine our aging experiences to value, rather than denigrate, old age. "Aging is part of a continuum of life. We age well when we see where we have been and what lies ahead. A positive and creative approach to the last phases of our lives, for me, gives meaning to the continuum of life."

What is John's aspiration as he grows older? "I hope that I will remain within a circle of loving friends who can provide me assistance when I need it." Certainly, many share this feeling. Strengthening our community is our best hope of achieving this vision.

Old Queers Acting Up

Performances of SAGE's unique theater group, "Old Queers Acting Up," dramatize experiences of ageism, homophobia, sexism and racism. The dialogue provoked with the audience can lead to healing and understanding.

Photo by Joshua Zuckerman

Carol Chambers: Reckoning with Ageism and Homophobia To Improve Nursing Homes

SAGE's national advocacy work received the University of Pennsylvania Institute on Aging's SHARE Innovation Award.

GlaxoSmithKline provides funding in support of SAGE's national advocacy through this Award.

SAGE Education and Advocacy work includes:

- National Conference on Aging in the LGBT Community
- Trainings for Care Professionals
- Publications/ Films
- SAGENet
- Task Forces and Advocacy Groups
- National LGBT Senior Needs Assessment/ Advocacy
- SAGE Safe Havens

Out of concern for LGBT people living in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, SAGE has been developing Training Tools to improve the sensitivity and cultural competence of staff working in these facilities. SAGE is partnering with the Brookdale Center on Aging, a leader in applied research, curriculum development, and training, on this project. Carol L. Chambers, M.Div., M.A., is the key Training Consultant from the Brookdale Center working with SAGE.

"The vision for this project is simple," said Carol. "People *of all ages* should be able to choose the expression of their gender and sexual orientation. If I or one of my LGBT sisters or brothers must enter a nursing home, I hope that I will be welcome exactly as I am and they as they are."

In addition to the very real fear of abuse that LGBT seniors face, Carol has seen first-hand how resident's "physical and emotional health suffers when that freedom is limited."

Carol believes that **the larger LGBT community has yet to face up to the importance of supporting this work.** "The emphasis on the 'youth culture' in the LGBT community contributes to a blindness when it comes to thinking about what it might mean to have to return to the closet so that we can exist safely in a nursing home. Most of us are in denial about 'ending up in one of those places.' I, like many, did not want to contemplate finishing my life away from my friends and community; however, I need to acknowledge that I may do just that."

She also feels that this **fear of aging is hindering the LGBT community from paying attention to the issue.**

"The most frightening part about this denial is that it slows down or mutes our activism. We must start now, not only for the LGBT persons already in nursing homes, but also for the generation soon to be entering nursing homes in increasingly large numbers."

Working on this project has challenged Carol personally. "Some of my own easy beliefs have been challenged and my lazy acceptance of ageism has been shattered. Suddenly, I am confronting my own aging process and fears about what will 'happen to me when I grow old.' I was over thirty before I came out. The last thing I want to have to do is return to that kind of painful place. I also realize that I have come to take the relative safety of an open, secure professional existence for granted."

Carol is excited that this project is again bringing together SAGE and the Brookdale Center. "SAGE brings a tradition of activism and social services and Brookdale brings a particular expertise and historical commitment to understanding the aging process," she said. "Their partnership makes the outcome more authentic, deeper, and, in the end, more likely to impact the lives of thousands of LGBT seniors."

After being tested in facilities in New York City, the Training Tools will be available nationwide from SAGE in late 2003.

Mark Sullivan and Jim Merritt: Sharing Visits to Enrich Each Other's Lives

"Serendipity" is how volunteer Mark Sullivan explains his good fortune of being matched with Jim Merritt through SAGE's Friendly Visiting Program. After the events of September 11th, Mark, a journalist, felt moved to offer some of his time to an organization that helps build community in the City.

Photo by Richard Rinaldi

He expected to be visiting someone who "needed cheering up." Thinking his visits would be "like therapy," he thought he would be in the role of dispensing encouragement. At the time, Mark sheepishly admits now, he imagined it would be a one-way affair, where he gave and Jim received.

SAGE's corps of several hundred active volunteers helps guide and realize every SAGE program!

On his first visit, he encountered a man lying on the couch who would barely lift his head to say hello, though he did recognize that there was more to Jim than met the eye.

Subsequent encounters began to reveal Jim's rich history. Despite being confined to a wheelchair due to an ankle condition, Jim's rich memories of New York City and Provincetown and travels abroad continue to foster a lively imaginative connection to many places outside his Manhattan apartment. His experiences as a former English professor and occasional City walking-tour guide, as well as his wide-ranging interests in architecture and history, served as a rich font of conversation with Mark. When weather permitted, they'd go together to Gramercy Park, to the bench that is dedicated to the memory of Jim's partner of 38 years.

Perhaps their friendship really gelled after a scary experience. Mark grew concerned that after several calls, Jim was not answering his phone. After trying several neighborhood hospitals, Mark finally located and visited Jim.

Now home again, Jim expressed surprise and was touched that someone would care enough to go to the effort of finding him.

They soon discovered that they shared a similar "ironic" view of the world. Or as Mark says to Jim, "I think I do get your sense of humor."

"You laugh in all the right places," Jim quickly replies. And they do laugh.

Mark brings a wonderful spontaneous quality to the friendship. A conversation about favorite childhood foods spurred him to surprise Jim with a bucket of fried chicken to enjoy on their next visit. Another time, he showed up with flats of seedlings on each arm to do a little "terrace gardening."

Over the year, **they both experienced these visits as a powerful tonic in their lives.** Jim claims he has more energy. For his part, Mark too began to reimagine some of his own circumstances. With Jim contributing his ideas, he planned a six-month extended tour of Central America. Though they missed their visits, Mark has now returned with stories about his journeys.

The Women's Dance Committee: Powering SAGE by Raising Funds and Building Community

SAGE members have always been central to developing and maintaining the wide array of programs we offer. In addition, members also have a proud tradition of donating to and helping raise funds to support them. It's another way that SAGE members manifest their ownership of the organization and demonstrate that we value our own community.

Though SAGE will continue to advocate for our fair share of foundation and government support, individuals will continue to be our primary source of support.

Celebrating their 20th Anniversary, the Women's Dance Committee constitutes one of the most steadfast and effective volunteer fundraising groups in SAGE history.

Beginning with a dance at the storied Limelight Club in Manhattan twenty years ago, through the years they've generated thousands of dollars annually. Because the tremendous work involved in putting on the dances is all done by these volunteers, the maximum amount of the funds generated go to SAGE programs.

Drawing hundreds of women of all ages to SAGE for a modestly priced event, the Women's Dance is now held three times a year – a testament to its success and growing popularity. And through it all, the Women's Dance Committee has done something even more remarkable—they've made fundraising fun.

Please contact the SAGE Development Office (Paula Pressley, Director of Development, 212-741-0387 or Doug Edelson, Associate Director of Development, 212-741-0342) if you have ideas for new ways to financially support SAGE's innovative programs to re-invent aging in the LGBT community. If you are interested in putting SAGE in your will, or joining SAGE's Legacy Society, please do not delay in letting us know of your plans. ***We would love to hear from you!***

SAGE is a social service and advocacy organization dedicated to meeting the unique needs of the senior lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities. It is committed to providing high quality, life enriching programs and services in a multi-generational environment that values age, gender, racial, religious, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity.

SAGE is further committed to fostering a greater understanding of aging, to promoting positive images of life in the later years, and to supporting and advocating for the rights of senior lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in both the LGBT and straight communities.

SAGE
305 Seventh Ave., 16th floor
New York, NY 10001
Phone: 212-741-2247
Fax: 212-366-1947
E-mail: sageusa@aol.com
www.sageusa.org

©2003 Senior Action in a Gay Environment, Inc.